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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000318

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SUBJECT: IRAQI PM MALIKI TELLS CODEL PELOSI 50,000 U.S.
TROOPS COULD BE OUT IN THREE TO SIX MONTHS, IRAQ SEEKS LEAD
ON SECURITY

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) Summary: During a January 26 meeting with a Congressional delegation led by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki stated that 50,000-60,000 U.S. troops could withdraw in three to six months as Iraqi forces improved in capacity. He urged greater U.S. support for training and military equipment, although Rep. Pelosi and others said they would not support plans Maliki raised for an additional USD 5.4 billion in U.S. assistance to build up Iraqi forces. Delegation members expressed concern about increased violence, slow reconstruction efforts, and corruption. They also pressed PM Maliki for timeline of when additional U.S. troops could leave and reported a lack of support for the war in Congress and by the American people. Maliki emphasized that Iraqis appreciated the role the U.S. played in liberating their country. He pointed to progress in areas such as military and police preparedness and reiterated that he looked forward to achieving Iraqi control over security. Ultimately the decisions about the U.S. presence in Iraq, Maliki underscored, remained with the U.S. president. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Participants in the delegation included Speaker Pelosi (D-CA), Rep. Ike Skelton (D-MO), Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA), Rep. Sylvestre Reyes (D-TX), Rep. John Murtha (D-PA), Rep. Nita Lowey, (D-NY), and Rep. David Hobson (D-OH). The Ambassador also participated in the meeting with PM Maliki, along with Congressional staff members.

Speaker Pelosi: American People Want New Direction

¶3. (S) Prime Minister Maliki initiated the discussion by welcoming the delegation and pointing out to Speaker Pelosi positive developments since the last time she traveled to Iraq. He noted the successful passage of a constitution, parliamentary elections, and the organization of a new government. Security remained a serious concern, but he and others in his government sought to increase the visibility and capability of Iraqi Security Forces. Speaker Pelosi expressed appreciation to Maliki for receiving the delegation, stating that the high level of the members was an indication of the high priority Iraq is for the Congress and the American people. She asserted that the American people had "called for a new direction in Iraq" in the November elections. Stating that such a change received bipartisan support, Speaker Pelosi then turned to Rep. Hobson to make further comments. Rep. Hobson told PM Maliki that he appreciated the sacrifices Iraq was making as it seeks to restore security. He and others in Congress, however, sought to find a way to redeploy U.S. troops from combat positions as rapidly as possible and begin reducing the U.S. military

presence in Iraq.

PM Maliki: Troop Reduction in Three to Six Months

¶4. (S) Expressing understanding of Rep. Hobson's concern, PM Maliki replied that Iraqis did not take comfort in the large number of U.S. troops killed in their country. He hoped we would soon see the moment when MNF-I would not have to be on the frontlines. American troops liberated Iraq, but it was now up to Iraqis to take control and be at the forefront. He noted the importance of the political process. He also cited the need for continued training for Iraqi Security Forces and better military equipment. If Iraq received that support, the PM said, MNF-I could remove "50,000 to 60,000 troops within three to six months."

¶5. (S) Speaker Pelosi and others in the delegation said they were glad to hear what they characterized as PM Maliki's commitment to a troop reduction; they would carry this message back to the Congress and their constituents. Rep. Skelton asked PM Maliki what would happen after three to six months -- would there be a further downsizing of the U.S. military presence and would MNF-I forces increasingly serve more in a support role? Maliki replied that he understood patience was running out in the U.S. Iraqi leaders and commanders were eager to take on greater responsibility for security, as he had stated in his letter attached to the December UN Security Council Resolution on extending the MNF-I presence. Maliki mentioned the creation of a Command and Control committee to coordinate the transfer of authority to Iraqi forces, and he remained committed to repositioning MNF-I troops into a support role. Ultimately, however, the

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size and function of the U.S. military presence in Iraq remained a decision to be taken in Washington.

Rep. Murtha: No New Military Funding

¶6. (S) Rep. Murtha asked PM Maliki what he meant when he said he needed U.S. support for training and equipment -- hadn't Iraq received substantial assistance already? PM Maliki replied that the U.S. had provided significant assistance, but there could be more, particularly in the provision of equipment. Murtha asked if Iraq sought financial assistance. Maliki responded that Iraq planned to spend USD 7 billion on security in 2007, which he understood would be matched by USD 5.4 billion in Iraqi Security Forces Funding from the U.S. He expressed general concern about equipment shortages for the ISF, citing the specific need for armored vehicles and light weapons. Rep. Murtha stated that he hoped PM Maliki had not been misled into thinking that Iraqi forces would ever reach the level of U.S. forces. He said he would oppose any proposal to provide the additional funding discussed by Maliki and, in his view, such a measure would never be approved by the current Congress. Maliki commented that perhaps Iraq could obtain additional funds by increasing oil production, as OPEC had granted Iraq an increase in oil exports. He emphasized that money should not become an obstacle to Iraq's democratic experiment.

¶7. (SBU) Rep. Reyes stressed that all the members of the delegation agreed that MNF-I should transfer leadership over security to Iraqis and that this should happen quickly. The U.S. had been committed to supporting Iraq for a little over four years to a degree that was "about as much as we could muster." Rep. Lowey underscored the importance of urgency in bringing about a political agreement, without which there could be no security. Meanwhile, the number of deaths in Iraq was "growing and growing," as Iranian influence and "investment" continued to increase. Rep. Lowey also expressed concern about the slow reconstruction, which was

impeded by corruption and insecurity. She urged that the GOI produce successes, so Congress members can tell constituents that U.S. expenditures in Iraq are producing positive results.

Iraq Wants Control over Security

¶ 8. (S) PM Maliki stated that up until that point the command of Iraqi security forces had been in the hands of the Americans. "Give us that command," Maliki said, "and then you can hold us accountable." He urged that Iraqi forces be put in front, with MNF-I remaining nearby until greater security is achieved. He pointed to progress over the past two months, singling out the police as performing particularly well. The Iraqi state had been completely destroyed, and the process of rebuilding it could not come easily. Maliki said his government was also recovering from corruption in the previous government, particularly in the ministries of Interior and Defense. He cited progress in the fact that there had been more construction in the past three years than in the entire ten years before. Government salaries had increased dramatically.

¶ 9. (S) Rep Lantos asked PM Maliki his vision, to the greatest degree of specificity, of how the U.S. will continue to reduce its troop presence in Iraq -- what happens after the first 50,000 mentioned by Maliki depart? What are the numbers and when will they leave? Maliki replied he could not speculate about what the situation would be like in three to six months but reported that in Amman he and President Bush agreed that Iraq should be in the lead over security. It would be a decision of the American president as to when and to what degree U.S. troops would withdraw. Maliki then asked the delegation if the Democrats would support the U.S. Administration's efforts to speed up the development of Iraqi Security Forces. Speaker Pelosi responded that she saw no support for underwriting Iraqi military purchases when Iraq has a USD 30 billion budget. She said that to the extent that the poor security situation in Iraq continued, any American politician who supported the war had "lost the ear of the American people." She added that in her view PM Maliki was in a better position to help President Bush than anyone through efforts to produce positive results.

Civil War or Political Violence?

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¶ 10. (S) Speaker Pelosi related that there is a percentage of the U.S. population that believed a civil war was going on in Iraq. She queried PM Maliki as to his characterization of the situation. Maliki responded that he did not believe Iraq was engaged in a civil war -- all sectors were against civil war. Rather, he said, neighboring countries were feeding sectarian violence and interfering in Iraq. The GOI had noticed that the level of sectarian violence was actually decreasing, but the number of political killings was increasing. Speaker Pelosi asked if PM Maliki was a party to the plan to surge the number of U.S. troops in Iraq. Maliki pointed to the importance of Baghdad security and stated that Iraqi Security Forces planned to go against all violators of the law during the surge.

Congress Wants Iraq to Succeed

¶ 11. (SBU) Speaker Pelosi closed the meeting by underscoring that all members of the delegation, indeed all Members of Congress, wanted to see Iraq succeed. In speaking candidly with the PM about issues such as funding, she stressed, the delegation sought to ensure that PM Maliki, as a friend,

clearly understood the position of the U.S. Congress.

¶12. (U) Speaker Pelosi made a positive statement to Iraqi TV after the meeting with the PM.

¶13. (U) CODEL Pelosi did not clear this cable.

SPECKHARD